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Thursday, November 10, 2005

FEDS CHARGE 13 PROPRIETORS OF ARIZONA MOTELS WITH USING BUSINESSES TO HARBOR SMUGGLED ALIENS

United States Attorney Seeks to Forfeit Five Motels

PHOENIX - Indictments charging 13 owners and former owners of six motels on Main Street in Mesa, Arizona were unsealed late yesterday. The indictments charge the defendants with harboring illegal aliens and allege that the businesses facilitated organized human smuggling. The government is seeking forfeiture of five of those properties following a nine-month undercover probe by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The initial results of the investigation were announced here this morning by U.S. Attorney Paul K. Charlton and ICE Special Agent-in-Charge Roberto G. Medina, who say the case underscores a commitment by the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security to aggressively investigate and prosecute human smuggling organizations and those who profit from this criminal enterprise.

According to the indictments, on numerous occasions the defendants rented rooms to undercover officers posing as human smugglers, with some charging the smugglers higher rates than their ordinary customers. The indictments go on to describe how some of the defendants allegedly coached the undercover officers on ways to conceal their smuggling activities, advising them to register under false names, rent multiple rooms, and park their vehicles in places that would avoid attracting attention.

Officers from ICE who were assisted by officers from the Mesa Police Department executed search warrants on five of the businesses named in the indictments. All of the defendants, with the exception of one, have been arrested. The final suspect, Roshankumar Bharatbhai Bhakta, is a fugitive and is still being sought.

U.S. Attorney Paul K. Charlton stated that "this investigation, as with others conducted in Arizona, demonstrates the extent to which the illegal alien smuggling industry has infiltrated and infected legitimate businesses. Unfortunately, it would appear that the potential for large profits has caused some business owners to not only turn a blind eye to illegal activity, but as these indictments indicate, in many instances to be complicit in their commission."

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“Human smuggling is a ruthless criminal enterprise that puts the safety of our communities and even our country at risk,” Special Agent in Charge Medina said. “These indictments should serve as sobering warning that ICE is targeting not only the criminal networks directly responsible, but also those who profit from it. Businesses like these that collude with human smugglers bear a substantial responsibility for the violence and bloodshed that this illicit trade generates.”

Each of the defendants in the case is charged with one count of conspiring to harbor illegal aliens, an offense that carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. In addition, the U.S. Attorney’s Office has indicted five of the motels and is seeking forfeiture of those properties.

Targeting the monetary assets of those involved in human smuggling is a key facet of ICE’s strategy to combat this dangerous criminal activity. In 2004, ICE nationwide seized more than \$7 million from organizations involved in human smuggling and human trafficking. This year, that figure more than tripled to nearly \$27 million.

The criminal probe focusing on the Mesa motels formally began in February 2005 after ICE received several leads from the public regarding possible human smuggling activity at the establishments. Border Patrol agents with U.S. Customs and Border Protection assisted ICE in the ensuing investigation.

Listed below are the motels targeted in the investigation and the defendants associated with each of the businesses:

Westernaire Motel – 5414 East Main Street

CR-05-1140

Bharatbhai Ranchhodhbhai Bhakta, age 52

Madhuben Bharatbhai Bhakta, age 53

Roshankumar Bharatbhai Bhakta, age 20

HiWay Host Motel 1260 – West Main Street

CR-05-1137

Ashok Ratanji Patel, age 52

Amarkumar Patel, age 23

Majestic Guest Inn 1554 – West Main Street

CR-05-1138

Anand Bhika Bhakta, age 34

Sunita Bhakta, age 36

Kiva Lodge Motel – 668 West Main Street

CR-05-1136

Babulal Mithalbhai Patel, age 52

Gitaben Babulal Patel, age 46

Centebars Suites and Apartments – 5402 East Main Street

CR-05-1141

Pravinkumar Vanmalibhai Patel, age 45

Sheilaben Pravinkumar Patel, age 45

CR-05-1139

Bhupendra Dahyabhai Patel, age 51, former owner of Roadrunner Motel, 2066 West Main Street

Madhuben Patel, age 50, former owner of Roadrunner Motel, 2066 West Main Street

An indictment is simply the method by which a person is charged with criminal activity and raises no inference of guilt. An individual is presumed innocent until competent evidence is presented to a jury that establishes guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The prosecution is being handled by Joseph Koehler, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix.

RELEASE NUMBER: 2005-198(Bhakta/Patel)

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